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NEW JOURNEYS OF THE IMAGINATION
AND ALWAYS . . . THE UNEXPECTED

Magazine

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Dark Crystal

JIM HENSON LEAVES THE MUPPETS BEHIND FOR A FULL-SCALE FANTASY EPIC POPULATED BY URRUS, GELFLINGS, AND SKEKSES. JAMES VERNIERE REPORTS.

Fairies, fays, elves, trolls, ogres, gnomes—these are the supernatural beings that inhabit both the world of myth and (along with hobbits, Munchkins, sorns, Lilliputians, and the rest) an entire subgenre of fantasy literature, which includes the classic work of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. These beings are a reminder that the unconscious mind constantly seeks to populate the unknown world with known, albeit fantastical, creatures, to give these creatures names, and to ascribe certain characteristics to each. It is a practice so universal that every culture on earth has its own invisible population. The creators of Universal's *Dark Crystal* would like to add a few new creatures to that

magical population, creatures with names like Skekses, Garthim, Gelflings, and Urrus. The degree of their success will depend upon how convincingly the filmmakers can bring these creatures to life.

It is relatively simple to create such creatures in literature, but until recently, filmmakers who wanted to adapt such fantasy creatures to the screen had two options: combine live action with stop-motion animation (an incredibly time-consuming process) à la Ray Harryhausen (*Jason and the Argonauts*, *Clash of the Titans*) or use conventional animation à la Walt Disney and, more recently, Ralph Bakshi (*Wizards*, *Lord of the Rings*). Now, with *Dark Crystal*, a third possibility has

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been explored: Muppets.

Sound ridiculous? And so it might, if you're thinking of Cookie Monster, Kermit, or Miss Piggy. Think instead of Yoda, that miraculous gnomelike creature in *The Empire Strikes Back* that sprang full-blown from the head of Jim Henson's colleague, Frank Oz, and you're on the right track. To this day many who were awed by Yoda are not aware that he was a Muppet—more complex and sophisticated than any of the *Sesame Street* gang, but a Muppet nonetheless. Now imagine a film full of such creatures. The possibilities are endless.

Actually, the creators of *Dark Crystal* don't like to refer to the creatures designed for their film as Muppets, which puts me in a quandary since they have coined no substitute term. When I suggested "nuppets" for "not Muppets," one source was not amused.

Conceived and created by British fantasy illustrator Brian Froud (credited as "conceptual designer"), puppet masters Jim Henson and Frank Oz, and *Star Wars* producer Gary Kurtz, *Dark Crystal* is one of the most ambitious and unusual genre films ever made. Budgeted at twenty-five million dollars, it's an imaginary-world epic which depicts a battle between the forces of good and evil on an alien planet with three suns. Excluding a few exteriors, *Dark Crystal* was filmed entirely at England's Elstree studios, where crews of filmmakers tackled the formidable task of transforming Brian Froud's paintings, with their eldritch creatures and extraterrestrial landscapes, into three dimensions. Codirectors Jim Henson and Frank Oz supervised not only the filming, but also the building of the articulated models, while production designer Harry Lang created the settings on Elstree sound stages. Alien skies were created by optical effects filmed in cloud chambers.

Based on a fairy tale written by Jim Henson, David O'Dell, and the celebrated British fantasy author Alan Garner, with cinematography by the great Oswald Morris



Artist Brian Froud's original design for an Urru known as The Weaver—prototype for the character shown on page 51.



Dark Crystal's action takes place on a world with three suns. Alien skies were created in a cloud chamber.



A member of the noble race of Urru, only one of *Dark Crystal's* menagerie of curious creatures.



First and worst among the villains in the film are the Skekses, rulers of the planet . . .

(*Moulin Rouge*, *Lolita*, *The Man Who Would Be King*), *Dark Crystal* is the story of a dying world ruled over by an evil race of creatures called the Skekses. Untouched by the Skekses, and living alone in a mystic valley, is another race called the Urru. An ancient prophecy predicts that a member of the race known as Gelflings would one day destroy the power of the Skekses. The film tells the story of that Gelfling, named Jen, and his quest to fulfill the prophecy.

Jen, an orphan adopted by the Urru, is instructed by a mystic master, who sends him on his quest. On his way he meets a wizardess-cum-chemist named Aughra, from whom he learns that to fulfill the prophecy he must restore a shard of crystal to the great dark crystal in the castle of the Skekses. As Jen journeys to the castle, he meets a female Gelfling named Kira, and together they continue the journey. In the film's exciting climax, Jen and Kira infiltrate the Skekses' castle, where they battle insectoid warriors called the Garthim and attempt to restore the crystal shard before the planet's three suns come into conjunction.

It is hard to imagine articulated models engaged in such diverse action and dialogue; but then, some of the designs are so complex that four to six people are needed to operate them. There are, for example, several different models of Jen: one for close-ups, one for walking, one for almost everything else. A few of the creatures, like the Garthim, are men in suits, but even the suits contain complicated cable and gear-activated mechanisms. At least fifty of the beings, including Jen and Kira, are fully articulated models. Voices for these characters will be provided by American and British character actors not familiar to the public.

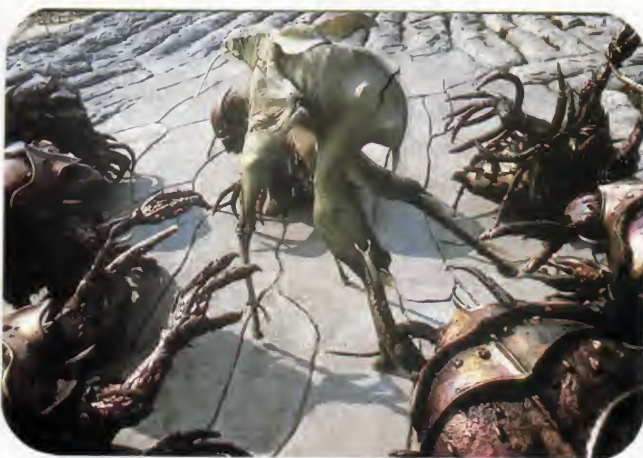
When Jim Henson, who developed the original Muppet designs, gave up *The Muppet Show* four years ago, he wanted to explore other possibilities, so he contacted Brian Froud with an idea for a live-action,



... with this Skekses chamberlain as one of the leading heavies.



The film takes its title from a magical crystal housed in the Crystal Chamber of the Skekses castle.



The Garthim, insectlike warriors in the service of the Skekses, attack a still-legged Landstrider.



A bevy of beaming Pod People, a tribe that adopts and raises the infant Kira, *Dark Crystal*'s heroine.

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feature-length film. Froud, whose work recalls Arthur Rackham and Edmund Dulac, spent the next three years developing designs for the characters and the environments. No newcomer to fantasy illustration, Froud started his career in Great Britain as a commercial artist and was discovered by the public when his work was included in the first *Worlds of Fantasy* calendar. Following that initial recognition, Froud was commissioned by Ballantine to do his own book, a collection called *The Land of Froud*. His subsequent work, *Faeries*, established him in the front ranks of graphic illustrators beside such artists as Frank Frazetta and Maurice Sendak.

Once Froud's designs were complete, Harry Lang and his crew took over. Along with Henson's Muppet design crew, Lang established ten separate working crews to develop each class of character: the Skekses, the Urrus, the Gelflings, the Garthim, the Pod People, the Landstriders, et al. Under the supervision of directors Jim Henson and Frank Oz, the film finished shooting four years after its initial development was begun.

In a break with tradition for Henson and crew, whose previous films, *The Muppet Movie* and *The Great Muppet Caper*, were G-rated, *Dark Crystal* is expected to get a PG-rating. Henson is entering territory previously staked out by *Star Wars* mogul George Lucas in an attempt to get a crossover audience. If all goes as planned, *Dark Crystal* should be a film adults will want to see—whether or not they have kids in tow.

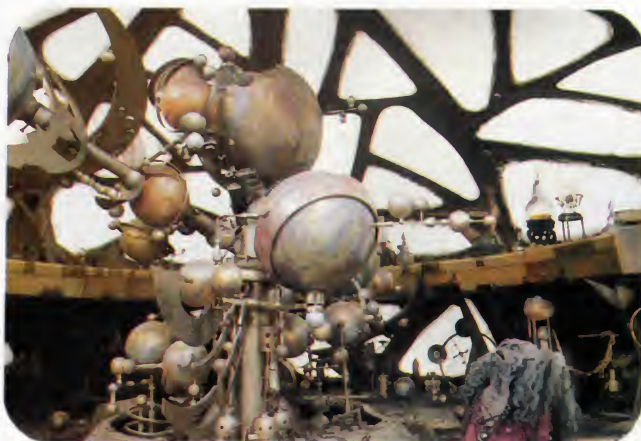
What remains to be seen is whether or not these filmmakers can create a world which will pass muster in the naturalistic medium of the cinema. If these still photographs are any indication, they have succeeded. 17



Kira's pet, a ball of fur named Fizzgig, provides a bit of comic relief.



She may not be much to look at, but Aughra the wizardess can help young Jen on his quest to destroy the power of the Skekses.



Aughra's well-furnished alchemical laboratory, complete with working orrery. (You do know what an orrery is, don't you?)



Filmmakers Gary Kurtz, Jim Henson, and Frank Oz pose amid their creations in the Crystal Chamber.